NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6003 JULY 17, 1978
BARRY MAUGHAN/AFRICA DIVISION

THE WESTERN SAHARA

ANNCR:

ALL SIDES TO THE CONFLICT IN THE WESTERN SAHARA SAY THEY ARE RE-ASSESSING THEIR POSITION FOLLOWING THIS WEEK'S COUP IN MAURITANIA WHICH TOPPLED THE GOVERNMENT OF PRESIDENT MAKTAR OULD DADDAH. VOA'S BARRY MAUGHAN HAS MORE DETAILS IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE NEW MAURITANIAN LEADER, LIEUTENANT COLONEL MUSTAPHA OULD MOHAMED SALEK, SAYS THAT AMONG MANY OTHER CONSIDERATIONS, HIS GOVERNMENT HAS PLEDGED TO WORK FOR PEACE IN THE WESTERN SAHARA. IN A NATION-WIDE BROADCAST, COLONEL SALEK SAID MAURITANIA IS DETERMINED TO FIND A SOLUTION TO THE WAR IN WESTERN SAHARA AGAINST THE POLISARIO MOVEMENT WHICH, HE SAID, HAD BROUGHT MAURITANIA TO THE BRINK OF ECONOMIC RUIN.

IN AN EARLIER INTERVIEW WITH FOREIGN JOURNALISTS, COLONEL SALEK EMPHASIZED THAT MAURITANIA WAS NOT A WARLIKE COUNTRY AND SAID THAT HIS COUNTRY'S RESOURCES AND ECONOMIC POTENTIAL SHOULD NOT BE LOOKED UPON AS A RESERVE FUND FOR WAR. ACCORDINGLY, THE NEW MAURITANIA LEADER SAID THAT HIS GOVERNMENT, IN CONSULTATION WITH MOROCCO, WILL CONSIDER HOW TO ESTABLISH PEACE IN THE REGION.

WHILE COLONEL SALEK WAS AIRING HIS VIEWS ON MAURITANIA'S POSITION REGARDING THE WESTERN SAHARA, MOROCCO'S KING HASSAN WAS TALKING ABOUT THE VERY SAME SUBJECT. THE MOROCCAN LEADER SAID THAT THE PROBLEM OF WESTERN SAHARA CANNOT BE SOLVED THROUGH VIOLENCE. RATHER, HE SAID, PEACE CAN ONLY COME TO THE REGION THROUGH, IN HIS WORDS, A RETURN TO REASON AND A DESIRE TO REACH A SOLUTION AT ANY PRICE. KING HASSAN SAID THIS REPRESENTS A CHALLENGE WHICH, HE SAYS, IS NOT BEYOND THE IMAGINATION AND

INTELLIGENCE OF THE GOVERNMENTS OF MOROCCO, MAURITANIA AND ALGERIA. THE MOROCCAN LEADER SAID HIS GOVERNMENT HAS NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT MAURITANIA HAS CHANGED ITS POLICY IN THE REGION. IN FACT, HE SAID, THE NEW GOVERNMENT IN NOUAKCHOTT HAS CONFIRMED ITS DETERMINATION TO CONTINUE THE EXISTING COOPERAITON AGREEMENTS WITH MOROCCO.

THESE STATEMENTS BY THE MOROCCAN AND MAURITANIAN LEADERS COME SHORTLY AFTER THE POLISARIO FRONT ORDERED ITS TROOPS IN MAURITANIA TO OBSERVE A CEASFFIRE. A POLISARIO STATEMENT SAID THAT THE DECISION HAD BEEN REACHED FOLLOWING RECENT EVENTS IN MAURITANIA -- A CLEAR REFERENCE TO LAST MONDAY'S COUP WHICH BROUGHT DOWN THE GOVERNMENT OF PRESIDENT MOKTAR OULD DADDAH. THE STATEMENT DESCRIBED THE CEASEFIRE ORDER AS A GESTURE OF GOODWILL, AND SAID THE ACTION WAS TAKEN OUT OF A DESIRE NOT TO INCREASE TENSION. THE POLISARIO FRONT SAID THE CEASEFIRE ALSO WAS AIMED AT GIVING THE NEW AUTHORITIES IN NOUAKCHOTT A CHANCE TO REVIEW WHAT IT CALLED THE CRIMINAL POLICY OF PRESIDENT MOKTAR OULD DADDAH.

MAURITANIA AND MOROCCO DIVIDED THE FORMER SPANISH COLONIAL TERRITORY OF THE WESTERN SAHARA WHEN SPAIN RELINQUISHED CONTROL OF THE COLONY IN NOVEMBER 1976. SINCE THAT TIME, POLISARIO FORCES WITH THE INCREASED SUPPORT OF THE ALGERIAN GOVERNMENT HAVE STEPPED UP THEIR ARMED STRUGGLE IN AN EFFORT TO GAIN INDEPENDENCE FOR THE BARREN BUT MINERAL-RICH TERRITORY.

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